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IDRC - Lib

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CONTROLLING TERMINOLOGY FOR TRANSLATION

In an effort to control translation costs, IDRC decided to develop a lexicon for controlling the vocabulary of the documentation and user interface for MINISIS. This paper follows the process used at IDRC to identify and standardize the terms for the lexicon. The process and some of its problems are particular to the environment at IDRC and some are more general. The paper attempts to cover all aspects of the process and identify what actions could circumvent the difficulties we encountered.

INTRODUCTION.

This paper discusses the efforts at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to develop a controlled vocabulary for the documentation of the MINISIS software package. The paper presents the concept we pursued and the areas where we met difficulties.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is dedicated to promoting independence in developing countries through development aid designed and developed by the governments and agencies within the regions affected. IDRC also supports three in-house development projects: a division devoted to the publication and dissemination of information acquired in the operation of development projects; an extensive library with holdings available to projects and program officers; and a bibliographic database management system provided to non-profit and government agencies in developing countries.

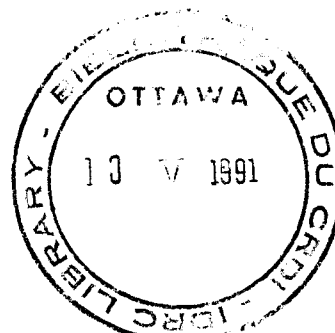
The database management system, called MINISIS, is distributed internationally. Its primary target audience is in developing countries and distributors sell the software in developed countries. The interface and most of the documentation are translated into French, Spanish, Thai, Chinese, Arabic. In 1989 during a major revision of the software, we introduced the idea of

restricting and controlling the lexicon for the software interface and documentation.

We argued that controlled terminology eases comprehension problems for users reading in a language other than their mother tongue. It also reduces translation costs while allowing the translations to be standardized across all languages and across future versions of the software. We proposed distributing databases containing the English term and its translation to the various translators to allow them to build up a lexicon for translation. Since the product is a relational database used by most of the translation sites, we proposed using MINISIS to develop the lexicon.

All documents published by IDRC must be in both of Canada's official languages. Translation of our English text into French is done through an in-house agency and reviewed by the technical writers and French speaking technical personnel.

MINISIS is distributed internationally to developing and developed countries. In some countries IDRC funds MINISIS Resource Centres and these centres receive funds for translation. The documents translated at the MINISIS Resource Centres are not reviewed for accuracy by IDRC staff.



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CONTROLLING TERMINOLOGY.

Ideally, a controlled vocabulary should be created, distributed and translated before the development of the documentation and/or user interface. This way it can act as a guide for developers and translators. It also encourages continuity in translations.

We maintain a database of the terminology for use in developing the MINISIS interface and documents. Our documentation style choices affect the scope of the terminology. In the terminology database we maintain terms for computer, library, and database concepts. This wider range of terminology allows us to discuss underlying concepts in the documentation.

Selecting the actual terms for inclusion was a seven part iterative process.

The first step required that we review the current terminology.

We have reviewed MINISIS documents, including the manuals, articles, minutes from design meetings, and papers presented by IDRC staff at conferences. We use RightWriter to scan the documents and generate a list of commonly used words. This step revealed the first symptoms of the upcoming problems. The initial review was cumbersome and generated intra-team conflict. People were slow to respond to the request and attempts to circulate a list took longer than the whole process described in this paper.

During step two, we reviewed bibliographic/database terminology.

We interviewed librarians and database experts to determine commonly used terms for specific concepts. For example, MINISIS has a facility called fast access searching,

which uses inverted files. Librarians refer to the facility as inverted files and database experts call it indexing.

We also reviewed ISO standards for computer, bibliographic, and database terminology. We ordered several ISO standards documents and have built a lexicon of terms covering documents, databases, computers, library concepts, and information storage concepts.

Using a team with representatives from the documentation team, the application development team and the interface standards team, we began the process of selecting and defining terms for the lexicon.

This sounds simple. Some MINISIS terms are very technical, but many users and user support people are familiar with these terms. There are many overlapping concepts used in MINISIS (library, relational database, and computer concepts). For many of these concepts each discipline has a different term. We had no criteria for selecting the terms except the preferences of the individuals involved. At this point in the process it was not unusual to find this group locked in a heated argument over terms and concepts. One possible benefit of this step was that it revealed several conceptual design problems in the software. No system for reporting these problems existed but office chat carried the message across to the system developers and introduced some changes into the design.

At this point we began to select up to 20 terms at a time for comments. We distributed these terms and definitions for review. This is one step I would drop, or alter the importance or purpose of dramatically. We were trying to run a consensus shop and the lexicon suffered dramatically. All those reticent souls who

would not raise a term in a direct interview felt free to scribble comments and ideas all over the distributed term selections.

Each a week, the terminology team met to identify the terms to be entered into the lexicon database. This step indicated final acceptance of a term and its definition. The same people who generate the lists review the comments. This presents problems. One large problem is interpersonal conflict. Sometimes varying points of view and experiences create conflict. There are no criteria for selecting, if the jury prefers a term, it is selected regardless of the comments generated through the review.

Terms entered into the database form the list of standard or accepted terms. We publish the database electronically on the Local Area Network (LAN) and as a paper document. It is intended that the developers consult the LAN for terms but people looking for a term either use an old phrase or ask the writing team for the correct term.

Not all the terms in the database need to be translated. The MINISIS system runs on a Hewlett-Packard Series 3000 mini-computer. The operating environment of the HP allows some flexibility for re-defining commands. The documentation identifies the commands as they operate on the version of MINISIS released by IDRC.

We will distribute the database of English terms electronically to translators in the MINISIS Resource Centre. The database contains the English term and its definition. In the process of review, some terms are replaced. The database has a field to identify the terms being replaced.

Verifying the translated terms is as difficult as creating the original list. A difficulty with verification comes from the

struggle between slang or colloquial translations and the "official" translations. We do not verify the terms translated by the MINISIS Resource Centres. The MINISIS Resource Centres translate and publish the target language versions of the documentation. We receive copies of these documents in their final form only.

SCHEDULING TRANSLATIONS

Since the documentation is being translated in Ottawa, Tunisia, Columbia, and China, we must co-ordinate the delivery of text. Also, since only one centre, Ottawa, uses professional translators, the text must be delivered in manageable and logically complete sections. Because of the bilingual policy in Canada, the French and English versions of MINISIS and its documentation must be released simultaneously. The other languages are published as soon as possible after that.

The translation of the interface presented several problems. We were aware of the need to translate text but not all of the commands. We were also aware that the same term in different languages could occupy different amounts of the screen. Chinese screen text had adopted the Roman text scrolling (left to right, top to bottom) but Arabic scrolls from right to left. We discovered that the Thai character set uses the same ASCII values that we were using to draw lines around menus.

We needed to develop sensible plans for dealing with the transmission of text, the production of the translated manuals, and the translation of visuals.

Previously, documentation was distributed on tape along with the software. Users printed the documentation on their own printers. This caused support problems

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because many sites could not afford to print the full set of documentation and did not print the updates. The profusion of printer models and capabilities meant the information was presented differently at each site. We now distribute paper documentation and have had to consider the difficulty this presents to the MINISIS Resource Centres. It is their responsibility to publish and distribute the target language documents because we cannot handle electronic versions of non-Roman character sets.

The page design decisions affect only the English and French versions of the documentation. The MINISIS Resource Centres are not expected to reproduce our page layout. Our production capabilities exceed the capabilities of the MINISIS Resource Centres. Additionally, the layout

which works for Roman based languages may not work for other character sets.

The illustrations created for the MINISIS documentation need to be translated both culturally and literally. Symbols and renderings appropriate for North America may not be appropriate for Arabic and Chinese audiences.

The controlled vocabulary allows us to introduce some standards into the production process. The results of our efforts are less than satisfactory at this point. We continue to develop and to refine the vocabulary, but we have not decided on a set of criteria for selection. The defacto criterion is the preference of the technical writers and support people involved in the process. If standards are introduced and the process clarified, the idea will aid the translators and developers.